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Editorial

THE RELATION BETWEEN RELIGION AND FREEDOM

This theme recalls one of the old great questions and controversies whether we think of what has gone on in the world at large, or in the souls of silent strugglers and sufferers. Throughout the long human story religion has ever warred with freedom, freedom with religion. At times, indeed, it has seemed as if choice must be made between religion without freedom or freedom without religion. Ecclesiastical and clerical domination, trial and execution of heretics, opposition to all progress which the church did not authorize, and the resultant nameless ravages wrought upon consciences of whole peoples—our purpose now does not require us to dwell upon all this, done in the name of religion, or upon their analogues, done in the name of freedom. Other questions clamor for consideration. Are religion and church hereditarily burdened with the evils of unfreedom? Is religious earnestness quite necessarily allied with a certain narrowness, if not stupidity even? Shall irritating encroachments upon free personality drive many of the strongest and best of our fellow-men from religion, Christianity, and church? Is it possible to unify religion and freedom? If so, how?

In the "trial-and-error" plan of history, some methods of unification have proved false already. These may be mentioned and set aside.

One of these false ways is to superpose freedom upon religion from without. Here as everywhere, spiritual reality must be

appraised from the point of view of its own peculiarity, and not approached from an alien standpoint. In other days—sometimes in our own—one has come from modern culture to impose one's requirements upon religion; another has come from illumination, real or supposed, to pour a little water into the too thick wine of religion; still another has come with the purged concepts of natural and historical science to teach religion reason. Now, is this the way to reach the goal of religious freedom?

First to pursue this plan is the company of "free thinkers." Their idea is to have religious freedom in the world once and for all—by eradicating religion! A radical and startling measure, but simple. But are these free thinkers religiously free? They are poor slaves of their hatred of religion, from which, however, they cannot effect release, since the roots of religion in the human soul are ineradicable. Hence they only end in a sorry antitype or caricature of religion. Church, dogmas, parsons, inquisitors, they have all these. It is all transposed into a different key, but it is the same song. These people have not the slightest notion of the true nature of religion, of the secret of its power over the human heart, and therefore they can do religion no harm. Their assaults only evoke reactions. They are themselves product of the conditions which they oppose, response to unfreedom in religion. Instead of creating freedom, they need themselves to be made free.

But a quieter company has adopted this method—the born skeptics and scoffers. No emancipation awaits them, either. Doubt alone has no strength; does not really have faith in its own self. Like a cold wind, it may be healthy, but it melts no ice and loosens no fetters. No live religion, no live church, is assailable by ridicule. It is only of and through its own self that serious religion lives or dies. Skepticism easily passes over into superstition, as it arose out of blind faith. Such natures, compounded of skepticism and scorn, without earnest positive conviction, numerously circulate among us as politicians, artists, scholars; but nothing whatever is to be expected from them in the way of religious freedom, or of any other kind of freedom. They simply do not count, for freedom comes from affirmation, not negation.

But there are others who seek freedom in the same general way. They are the representatives of ecclesiastical "liberalism," religious free thought, "free" Christianity. They do not propose to have freedom without religion and church, but with them. Instead of attacking the truth of religion and church, they change its forms. They break oppressive confessional yokes. For an antiquated theology, they substitute a theology that is in better keeping with modern views. Under various names, they start parties to maintain the thought of freedom in the church. Do these people conclude that covenant between religion and freedom for which so many of us now yearn?

Without doubt this is a much more serious and hopeful undertaking. These men have some understanding of the nature, right, and truth of religion. Deep spirits as well as superficial, real greatness as well as imaginary, are to be found in this class—glorious men who are an honor to our race and who have a permanent place in the history of the human spirit, a Channing, a Parker, a Martineau. They have certainly accomplished very much. Fresh currents, free movements, they have started, which have been of great value. And yet, on the whole and in the main, their way has not led to the goal. There are two causes for this.

For one thing, it is quite out of the question to expect religious freedom from any party whatsoever. Parties can champion free *opinions* and *forms*, but these latter by no means guarantee the *spirit* of freedom. All opinions and forms are free as long as they are true and living, as long as they correspond to a definite stage of spiritual development. Thus, forms and opinions, which we call "orthodox," may be felt as thoroughly free by definite times and persons; and so-called "liberal" opinions and forms, as soon as they are outstripped by the development, are felt to be unfree. Everything that is petrified is felt to be yoke and compulsion, even if it be called "free thought." But all parties and tendencies tend to petrification—and naturally "liberal" parties most of all, since they must follow the development, and lose their right to be if they lag behind the development. Then, too, parties know little of self-criticism, much of self-praise, combined with disparagement and even calumny of other parties. Progress and

truth are held to be in their hands. But the great stream of life flows past them and turns into other channels. Dogmas, confessions, catechisms, inquisitions, popes and clerics reappear, together with all the personal lust for power, all the hatefulness and pettiness—in short, under a new name we have all the old misery, doubly hard to bear under the name of freedom.

But there is a second reason why freedom cannot be a party cause. There is a certain inner contradiction between freedom and party. Freedom must be a thing of the individual. Program and discipline belong to party. To these, every member of a party must submit. Large numbers must belong to a party, if it is to amount to much. Loneliness belongs to the essence of freedom. No one knows what freedom is who has never dared to hearken to his own soul when the world of convention and prepossession opposed and ignored him. The true heroes and harbingers of the world's freedom have been the men who, fighting against all the tendencies and parties of their day, have prepared the way for the new truth of God in the desert of semblance and of lies. Freedom dwells in the soul of the individual. It is a thing of disposition. It must be *earned* by him who would possess it. Therefore, in the most radical liberal parties there are men who are quite unfree and stupid, who have no understanding for modes of thought foreign to them, but also no regard for the freedom of others, and who do not shrink from brutal violence even while genuine lofty spiritual freedom may be found among those who are branded as obscurantists. Like truth, righteousness, love, piety, freedom is the prerogative of no party. It is simply vanity or ignorant audacity for one to say: "We are the party of the religiously free." To repeat, religious liberal parties can do much good; but freedom itself dwells in a higher and holier home.

In this connection there is another matter to which one hesitates to refer. But it seems to be a fact that all religious liberalism has a quite limited sphere of activity. It exercises some influence upon the culture class. But it cannot easily win the most serious-minded religious people. It finds its disciples for the most part with those who dispense with real religious power and passion. Why is this? Lack of knowledge, lack of courage, or, on the other

hand, the intractableness of fanaticism? That explanation is at once too easy and too unjust. The key to the riddle is that religious liberalism also works too much from without. It approaches religion with standards inwardly alien to religion. It comes with modern culture and world-view, with natural science, philosophy, and biblical criticism. But, *ultimately*, what does the religious soul care for all these things? We may perhaps logically discredit verbal inspiration, miracle, deity of Christ. The religious soul may not be able to resist our reasons, but it will not trust us *religiously*, and will close the gates of its sanctuary against us. It has the feeling that its is the better portion.

And so these manifold measures for obtaining religious freedom come to a point where they simply cannot get on any farther. Their advocates are puzzled today because, with reason and science and the whole intellectual development, and, as they think, religion itself, on their side, they cannot go forward. Dumbfounded, they see that in spite of scientific schooling and rational illumination, Roman Catholicism is achieving noteworthy victories, and apparently outworn Protestant beliefs, even mysticism and superstition, are enjoying a sort of repristination.

Then, can the human soul be both religious and free, critical and confident, hospitable and stable? Or, must we make a grievous choice, religion without freedom, freedom without religion, some miserable mixture of the two? And, look where we may in history, do we not see compulsion, confinement, oppression of free thought?

Except in one place. Religion and freedom were completely one in Jesus Christ. Jesus was redeemer—the deepest fact in any religion. Religion redeems from fear of fate, death, and sin—from fear of God, man, and ourselves. Even when it binds—binds to God and to conscience—it does so that it may free. This is dumbly and distantly true of all religions, it is clear as the sun in the case of Jesus. At times even Christianity has fettered; Jesus frees. His freedom is not from without inward, but from within outward. Freedom in religion can be created only through religion itself. Freedom must be demanded, not in the name of culture, of science, of criticism, but in God's name. To

Jesus, God was the reality of realities—not a word, not a theory, not a mystery of cult, not a distant dark cloud, but the sun giving life and light to all. And Jesus never asked men concerning their theories of God, forced no theories upon them. In his own person he brought God to them. And the God of Jesus is freedom's supreme and final word. Thus, Jesus became the world's freedom, the freedom of religion through God. Religion *is* freedom.